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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2504, TFLE01: SINIORA BELIEVES HE HAS THE CONFIDENCE OF

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2504	2006-08-01 07:01	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002504

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2016
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SUBJECT: TFLE01: SINIORA BELIEVES HE HAS THE CONFIDENCE OF HIS PEOPLE, THE SUPPORT OF HIS CABINET, AND THE COMMITMENT OF THE FRENCH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

11. (C/NF) In a meeting with the Ambassador and poloff late on July 31, Prime Minister Siniora explained that his declaration to not negotiate until a cease-fire had been implemented gave him the credibility and support he needs across Lebanon's political spectrum to conclude a durable cease-fire agreement. He implied that if he had conducted diplomatic business-as-usual in the aftermath of Qana, his ability to conclude an agreement would have been destroyed. Siniora said his discussions with French FM Douste-Blazy earlier in the day had focused on the composition and deployment timing of the proposed multi-national stabilization force (which Siniora sees as a UN force), and as a result of these talks, felt reasonably confident the French would rapidly deploy 1,000 troops to serve as the nucleus for the full force. Siniora stated enthusiastically he still had the full support of his Cabinet with regard to his seven-point plan, but became somewhat annoyed when asked what his fallback position would be if GOI refused some of those points. Responding to the Ambassador's skepticism, Siniora also projected an unexplained confidence that, upon implementation of the cease-fire, he could convince Hizballah to either move north of the Litani or surrender their heavy weapons to the LAF. End summary.

A WAKE UP CALL

12. (C/NF) PM Siniora described the current situation with IDF and Hizballah locked in close combat as extremely difficult, with neither side able to break free of the other. He said yesterday's attack on Qana had "opened eyes" and might actually help make progress to a durable cease-fire. Concerning his July 30 declaration to Lebanon's diplomatic corps that his Government would not negotiate until a cease-fire was called, Siniora said it had been a political imperative. If he had continued his schedule to meet with SecState, Siniora maintained, his credibility would have evaporated with the Lebanese people, and his ability to conclude any negotiation would have been mortally wounded. "Yesterday, we did the right thing," he stated.

13. (C/NF) Siniora said that, intellectually, he understood the Israeli government when it states that it cannot accept a cease-fire unless a credible stabilization force is already in place. But for a multi-national force to step in right at the moment of the guns going silent, he maintained, would require a firm political solution in the form of a detailed UN Security Council resolution. Siniora said that the situation on the ground does not permit a cease-fire to be delayed. The Ambassador explained that U.S. thinking is revolving around a cease-fire at the time of the passage of a UNSC, but there must be a clear framework for a sustainable cease-fire in the UNSCR and the stabilization force must deploy as close to passage of the UNSCR as possible.

14. (C/NF) Referring to his lengthy discussions with FM Douste-Blazy, Siniora said the French are already writing the initial draft resolution. He parried the Ambassador's suggestion that his Government preface the introduction of any resolution with a letter to the Security Council requesting such action -- thereby making it more difficult for Russia and China to object. Siniora maintained it was already clear what was needed -- a detailed resolution -- and such a letter would just add another step to the process. He estimated that a resolution with the required specificity could be ready for the Council's consideration late this week.

15. (C/NF) Pressed by the Ambassador repeatedly by phone

throughout the evening about the need for a letter and for him to play a leadership role by detailing what a stabilization force would do, Siniora become increasingly annoyed. Douste-Blazy, he said, does not see a letter as a necessity. Moreover, Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki was arriving in Beirut later that evening (where he met with the French). Mottaki surely is coming to enlist Hizballah ministers, and perhaps Nabih Berri, to try to block a stabilization force and adopt more hard-line positions in general. Thus, Siniora said, the chances of his cabinet

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approving a letter (which, under the limited powers Lebanon's constitution gives the PM is a necessity) are "zero." If he brings the proposed letter to the cabinet, not only will it be rejected, but there is a danger the cabinet will then break the hard-fought consensus on the "seven points."

DEFENDS HIS SEVEN POINTS APPROACH

16. (C/NF) With his domestically well-received Sunday statement, PM Siniora said he hoped both his Government and that of Israel could expeditiously accept the deal outlined in his seven points. When asked if thought his plan would be accepted without change, Siniora argued that if all the points were addressed and an effective multi-national force available to enforce its implementation, Israel would achieve something it had not been able to achieve for decades -- a secure and stable northern border. "They are getting what they have always wanted," he declared, implying that if Israel tried to get a better deal, the opportunity may well be lost.

17. (C/NF) The Prime Minister said both GOI and GOL were getting tied up in "details" and risked losing the main objective -- peace and security for Israel, and peace and a disarmed Hizballah for Lebanon. Siniora argued that only the Iranian and Syrian regimes benefited from bickering over the proposed cease-fire agreement and its related UNSC resolution.

18. (C/NF) When asked about his inexplicable confidence that Hizballah would either move north of the Litani with its heavy weapons, or allow itself to be disarmed by the LAF, Siniora said he wasn't certain, but his on-going communication with Hizballah through Nabih Berri and other Shia interlocutors led him to believe they were "considering" and close to such action.

BELIEVES FRENCH READY TO LEAD THE FORCE

19. (C/NF) Another area where PM Siniora felt rapid progress was being made was the willingness of France to take a leading role in the multi-national stabilization force (which Siniora usually referred to as the "UN force"). Siniora said his discussions with FM Douste-Blazy have been detailed and fruitful. (Note: Both PM Siniora and his senior advisor, Ambassador Mohammad Chatta, came into the meeting straight from their talks with Douste-Blazy in ebullient spirits. End note.)

110. (C/NF) Siniora said he was reasonably confident the first contingent on the ground would be a 1,000 man French unit, and that these personnel would form the nucleus of the rapidly deployed stabilization force. He said getting the French commitment was one of the two primary reasons for Douste-Blazy's visit -- the other being coordination on the wording of the draft UN resolution.

111. (C/NF) Midway through the meeting, PM Siniora took a lengthy call from PM Tony Blair and when he returned, indicated the British Prime Minister was also on board with the French as the vanguard unit. He also obliquely referred to a British commitment to provide "reconnaissance" to assist with the required monitoring function of the force.

"CREATING THE CONDITIONS"

¶12. (C/NF) Prime Minister said he believed his Minister of Culture Tarek Mitri would capably represent the Government in the intense deliberations about to commence in New York. And he conveyed almost unnatural confidence that things were falling into place quite well. He said he had created the "conditions" that were necessary to win Lebanese support for the cease-fire agreement that treated the critical concerns of both governments.

¶13. (C/NF) As he has in almost every previous meeting, he re-emphasized the centrality of the Shebaa Farms issue -- characterizing it as the key with which to break Hizballah's hold on Lebanese sympathies. He then rather hastily ended the meeting with his observation that the U.S. had been "in the dock" long enough in Lebanese and Arab public opinion, and now it was time to put Iran there. That is possible with

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the adoption of his point on Shebaa Farms (that is, a temporary UN stewardship over the area).

COMMENT

¶14. (C/NF) Our message to Siniora -- both in the meetings and in the subsequent phone calls -- was that he needs to send a letter to the UNSC defining his needs, especially in relation to a stabilization force. He was not, unfortunately, in receive mode. We will meet Marwan Hamadeh (the cabinet minister least prone to flinching) today to try to work the idea from inside the cabinet. We will also ask to see the suddenly (and curiously) inaccessible French Ambassador in an attempt to find out whether Douste-Blazy really said that a GOL letter is not necessary -- and whether the French really are, as Siniora claimed, ready to send the vanguard of a stabilization force. (The last time we saw Ambassador Emie a few days ago, he was decidedly cool on the idea and almost visibly hostile to our ideas, a sad development after nearly two years of Franco-American partnership on Lebanon that achieved so much.)

¶15. (C/NF) Siniora, on the verge of seeing his cabinet collapse in the aftermath of the Qana incident, has now rebounded on a populist high. His 7/30 vow not to negotiate until a cease-fire is in place appealed to the beleaguered Lebanese masses (nearly a quarter of whom are now displaced, putting strains across the entire country). As even moderate Christian leaders are warning, our position is interpreted here as "immoral," as any delay in a cease-fire is seen as our acceptance of further civilian deaths and destruction. At heart a reasonable and sensible man, Siniora has not yet drunk from that toxic cup of know-nothing anti-Americanism that so many Arab leaders have used to maintain a grip on power. But he has discovered that being seen to stand up to American requests shores up his cabinet and popular base. We got nowhere yesterday on convincing him to send a letter, and we doubt that, after his meetings today with the Iranian Foreign Minister, he'll be any more eager to confront his cabinet with something he believes won't be acceptable to the Shia ministers.

FELTMAN